

Written Testimony for the Little Hoover Commission Concerning the Governor's Reorganization Plan for California's Youth and Adult Correctional Agency

By Cindie Fonseca, Prison Educator
California Department of Corrections
Bargaining Unit 3, Teachers and Librarians, SEIU Local 1000

It is an honor and a privilege to have this opportunity to provide testimony to the Little Hoover Commission concerning the Governor's Reorganization Plan for California's Youth and Adult Correctional. In 1994 I began my career as a prison educator for the Department of Corrections. In this capacity, I have been a Vocational Instructor of Printing & Graphic Arts at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco, California. In the summer of 2003 I became a member of the Unit 3 Bridging Program Negotiations Team, which negotiated the terms and conditions of the Bridging Program. I have subsequently become a member of the Unit 3 Bargaining Unit Negotiations Team.

Since October of 2004, we have had the opportunity to tour 15 of the 32 correctional institutions. Before we are done, we will have toured all of prisons in California. These visits have given me a perspective that encompasses all regions of California.

In large part, we are in agreement with the findings of the recent "Corrections Independent Review Panel" report and the recommendations put forth in the governor's reorganization plan. I welcome this opportunity to offer an informed perspective about the most effective ways to address the serious problems with the educational system.

The Governor's reform plan consistently depicts individual institutions as being too spread out with little, or no accountability. We have seen this first hand. Some Wardens and custody staff are very supportive of education, and others openly oppose the idea of educating inmates, which has made it extremely difficult for educators to succeed. The teachers in the prisons have always measured success on whether or not each one of their inmate students returned to prison. Recidivism has always been the teacher's measure of success.

The tours of these facilities have given me the chance to see my peers at work and the innovative programs that are currently being delivered by these dedicated, committed educators. However, the funding and the programs are not sufficiently in place to meet the need and to deliver quality education. Programs are needed that will result in reducing recidivism and improving outcomes for youth and adults once returned to society.

Unfortunately, educators in the Department of Corrections are harshly underpaid compared to our counterparts in the public sector. There is an average 30% disparity state wide between the State teachers' salaries and the state's school district teachers. This only hinders education. Recruiting good people is a key component of creating a successful education department. However, recruiting good teachers will be difficult at

best until the pay disparity issue is resolved. The reform plan references a \$4.2 million dollar budget for recruitment. This would be an advertising campaign. This money would be better spent by increasing salaries. In addition to marketing these positions, actual changes need

to be made to the compensation levels and quality of education to attract teachers from the private and public sectors.

Once one gets started in this career, it becomes difficult to leave. The dedicated teachers of the Department of Corrections remain because they believe in change. Change is seen everyday through their students, who happen to be inmates. The job satisfaction, for us educators, comes from the success of our students.

The Governor's suggestion that private contractors need to be utilized more extensively in order to reduce recidivism is wholly in error. Contracting out services that have previously been performed by a committed and dedicated staff will not achieve the Governor's goal of reducing recidivism. For example, I have witnessed contracted staff walked off the prison for numerous breeches in security. Turnover is high among contracted staff, and continuity especially important in education is lost. Correctional staff, especially educators, need to have the training that allows them to be competent teachers, but at the same time understanding the ramifications of working with inmates and wards. These are broad disagreements we as teachers have with the Governor's plans for Corrections. For the remainder of this testimony we would like to address the specific areas that relate to education and the effects that the changes we recommend would have on reducing the recidivism rate and saving the State and the taxpayers money.

While we endorse the essence of the recommendations made by the "Corrections Independent Review Panel" chaired by Governor George Deukmejian related to programming and education, we are concerned that the most recent GRP does not address the issues core to improving education programming and saving taxpayers money.

"To better prepare inmates for release, the panel recommends providing inmates with much greater access to in-prison education, vocational classes, life-skills training, re-entry services and drug treatment." The scale of programming needed to serve the current population is significant, based on the Panel's calculations:

1. The state currently house 162,000 adult inmates.
2. The state supervises 114,000 former inmates.
3. The state spends nearly \$6 billion dollars performing these functions.

Rather than invest in programs which could reduce these numbers, however, the state has cut programs in recent years, with a resulting rise in recidivism. A study conducted in 1999 by the Little Hoover Commission concluded that inmates were returning at a rate of 43% within one year and 54% within two years. Approximately 90 percent are released on parole and more than half return to prison.

The Corrections Independent Review Panel has identified 3 key components and concluded that these would eventually influence the size of the population:

- 1-length of sentence,
- 2-the training and treatment they receive during incarceration, and

3-support in community when they parole.

Realizing that we have a huge number of people incarcerated or on parole, we see we have a real job in store for us. Quite frankly, it is also going to cost money. But the department saves money when an inmate is able to complete his parole and reintegrate into society.

The “Corrections Independent Review Panel” cites numerous studies that relate educational programs and recidivism rates. Recidivism decreases when students receive academic and vocational programming. Looking at it in terms of an investment the “Corrections Independent Review Panel” states, “Their findings showed that prison programs can reduce crime in a cost-effective manner. For example, the study showed that prison vocational programs generate savings of up to \$12,000 per participant and reduce crime by 13 percent, and that education programs generate savings of up to \$9,000 per participant and reduce crime by 11 percent.” However, only 23% of inmates are actually enrolled in these types of programs.

“For programming to succeed, in turn, the system must free up programming space and provide adequate staffing.” This is also clearly stated in the report. The overcrowding is “out-of-control”. Currently, there is not enough programming space, nor adequate staffing. Those two conditions need to change immediately. Yet, the Department of Corrections’ Education and Inmates Program Unit have recently been directed to place a moratorium on hiring.

The effect of doing nothing or making cosmetic changes to the education system at this time is serious. Recent numbers cited in the December report show the effects of such a plan of action in recent years:

- 65% of recent inmates released are unable to read, write, communicate in English, and function on a job.
- Parolee unemployment rate is 70 to 80 percent.
- Re-Entry programs are only available to 30% of the inmates who are paroling.

Yet, in 2003, the Department cut 300 Vocational Programs and eliminated Pre-Release and Re-Entry programs. According to the State this was done for budgetary reasons, despite an increasing corrections budget. We believe there is an obvious cause and effect. Education programs have been cut over the past three decades and the number inmates returning to prison has gone up proportionately. We are at an all-time high of inmate population. The vocational programs and pre-release programs need to be reinstated. Program space and staff must be put back into the prisons.

A program introduced recently aims at filling the gaps created by the destruction of many of these programs. These programs should be fully reinstated and expanded, based in part on the cost-savings and improved quality of life already demonstrated. Under the Bridging Program, the Department of Corrections has allowed inmates to earn day-for-day credit immediately upon entering the prison system at the Reception Centers, before being transferred to a more permanent site. The Bridging Program is unique in that for the first time in the history of our prison system the inmates are receiving education in the

Reception Centers. This program is new, however it is already creating a cost-savings for the state as the inmates are now earning day-for-day credit immediately. For every day of credit earned an inmate's sentence is reduced by one day. For every day an inmate's sentence is reduced the State and the taxpayers save \$78.00. Also, anecdotal evidence is beginning to emerge that the bridging program is reducing the level of violence in the reception center. This is another cost-savings for the State and the taxpayers.

Current staffing for the program, however, is inadequate and should be changed to meet the needs of the students. The ratio of student to instructor is 54 to 1: the needed staffing is 425, yet the State has only hired 275. The State must remain committed to filling these vacant positions and identifying available program space to make this program work successfully. There are several Reception Center institutions including, Wasco, North Kern and CIM that are severely understaffed. Additional educational staff need to be hired immediately.

Finally, we are concerned that this GRP will introduce a reorganization of agencies by merging two departments without further addressing much needed reforms in education. The Governor's Reorganization Plan 2 states: "The proposed reorganization (the consolidation of the CDC and the CYA) is a first step." We are concerned that it may be the only step. The plan goes on to state: "It will require significant investment of time and resources, and that the potential prize is significant: improved services to make life safer for the people of California." While long on lingo, the plan is short on concrete reforms, particularly in the area of education. The Governor's plan states "the educational, vocational and offender programs branch will house programs designed to enable offenders to successfully reintegrate into the community". We hope the ensuing programs and funding decisions bring these words to fruition.

There will be cost savings by consolidating the CDC and the CYA. However, unless other key recommendations of the report are implemented these will only be one time savings this year. If the education reforms are implemented there will be continued savings. Here is the State's opportunity—to reinvest the savings from the consolidation into education and the state will realize savings from here on in. The state saves money with each inmate and parolee it safely removes from the prison and parole population.

Over 100,000 inmates are paroled each year. These inmates come back into our communities, and become our neighbors. Do we want them to come back into our communities as they do now uneducated? Unable to find work? With no alternatives but to return to crime? We do not believe that this is what the people of California want.